

This week's theft of the personal data of more than 26 million veterans is a serious failing on the part of the Department of Veterans Affairs. It is despicable that these veterans have been put in a precarious financial situation by the very government they put their lives on their line to protect. The responsibility for this fiasco extends beyond the individual data analyst who took the files, to the administrators who continue to preside over an office environment where such an incident could take place.

This theft could hardly have been a surprise to those responsible for information security at the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Department is notorious for lax security, "...having earned an 'F' on an annual federal computer security report card compiled by the House Government Reform Committee in four of the last five years." That Veterans Affairs officials allowed this environment to persist, even after faced with four years of scathing criticism, is indicative of the degree of incompetence of those in charge.

Despite this, Secretary Nicholson of the V.A. Department has failed to take responsibility. To make matters worse, they have yet to address the situation in any meaningful way. Instead of immediately notifying the veterans affected, assessing the situation, and offering a feasible solution, the Secretary advised veterans to keep an eye on their finances. He then went on to blame a subordinate for not informing him of the crisis sooner. Nearly two weeks elapsed before Nicholson learned of the May 3 theft, and the public was not informed until May 22. Ironically, the department has done nothing in this situation but harm the interests of those it should be protecting.

Of greater concern, however, is the fact that this is not an isolated incident; instead, it is only the latest example of a larger trend of carelessness and disregard of the people's interest on the part of this administration. From illegal wiretaps to warrant-less searches under the Patriot Act, the privacy of citizens' personal information has been blatantly ignored. To add insult to injury, those responsible are often lauded instead of reprimanded – Bush just declared that he has "full faith and confidence" in the Veterans Affairs Secretary. Is it only a matter of time before Nicholson is decorated with the Presidential Medal of Freedom?

This latest of fiascos confirms that those in power are little concerned with the wellbeing of the average American citizen, let alone veterans who have defended our country. In the wake of this mess, the administration must realize that it is their responsibility to take steps to protect the privacy of the American people. Furthermore, they must learn to distinguish between incompetence and excellence in their own ranks, and issue praise accordingly. Only then can

this administration begin to restore the people's faith, which it has justly lost.

The V.A. Department is considering offering consumer counseling to those affected by the data theft. Any veterans in the area who feel they are at risk should contact my office for further assistance.